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ABOUT BOOKS

Four Anomalous Volumes: pampered birds, missing birds, dead birds, and bird leftovers

Mark Lynch

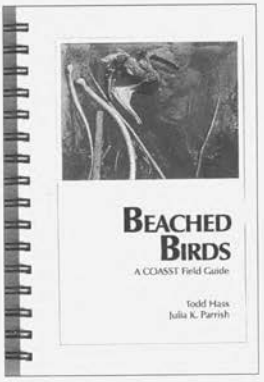
Beached Birds: A COASST Field Guide. Todd Hass and Julia K. Parrish. 2000. Wavefall Press. Seattle, Washington.

Bird Tracks and Signs. Mark Elbroch with Eleanor Marks. 2001. Stackpole Books. Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots: Exotic Animals in Eighteenth-century Paris. Louise E. Robbins. 2002. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore, Maryland.

The Ghost with Trembling Wings: Science, Wishful Thinking and the Search for Lost Species. Scott Weidensaul. 2002. North Point Press. New York, New York.

For the most part bird books fall into just a few rather typical categories. There are the endless field and identification guides to seemingly every group of birds that has ever lived. Regional breeding bird atlases are a technical category of bird books that are becoming increasingly popular. There are now also "where-to-go" guides for most states and many areas of the globe, that are read voraciously by the twitching set. In addition, there are a small number of interesting personal accounts of a life birding, birder bios if you will. Books of art and photography of birds are always popular, even if they only end up on that coffee table. Finally, there are a smattering of popular books on bird lives and behavior. In this review I will consider four books, very different from one another. These titles should be of interest to birders, but they definitely stand apart from the usual birder's books. Two are unusual guides, and two are books about how humans think about the natural world.



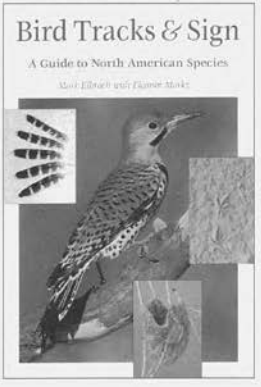
I have to admit that when one of my students, who works at Tufts Wild Animal Clinic, handed me *Beached Birds*, I thought it was a joke. After all, there have already been conceptually droll (but dull in execution) parodies of field guides that focused on the identification of road kills or bird droppings. When I realized that *Beached Birds* was a serious guide, my reaction was at first both repulsion and fascination. After all, it takes a bit of getting used to a photographic guide to dead birds washed up on shore. Amazingly, this is also a state-of-the art guide created for a very serious purpose.

The Coastal Observation and Seabird Survey Team (COASST) of the state of Washington is a "citizen science program established to identify the carcasses of marine birds found on beaches along the outer coast of Washington State" (p.1). Volunteers systematically walk beaches and measure, identify, and photograph dead seabirds. As is pointed out in the introduction to this unique volume, dead birds can provide a wealth of information about changes in habitat, disease, and the health of fisheries. In the event of a human-caused coastal environmental catastrophe like an oil spill, these data can provide a background level of typical mortality as well as help identify the victims. This project is a great example of citizen science with a real goal.

In each two-page species account, there are color photographs of typical carcasses. Some of these are not for the weak-stomached. Written details include all the key plumage field marks to look for in a beached, as opposed to a living, specimen. The book includes a table of complete measurements, notes on similar species, abundance charts of when this species is most often found beached, and a checklist of special points for observers to check. There is even a life-size drawn profile of the bill in every species account, so that you can literally lay the specimen on the field guide and compare. There are special sections on identification of legs and feet, wings, and identification flow charts for groups of birds with similar species like gulls. An important section is the "Guidelines for Dealing With Dead Birds" (p.4), which outlines both the practical and health challenges of handling long-dead and possibly oiled birds. The book is printed on heavy duty, slick stiff paper that appears somewhat water-resistant, and is spiral bound so that it opens easily and flat.

The only drawback to this outstanding and very useful guide is that it is created for the Pacific Northwest coast. This means that species like Marbled and Ancient murrelets, Tufted Puffin, and Pelagic Cormorant are fully described, but Razorbill, Atlantic Puffin, or Great Cormorant are not. It would be great to have a similar book on Atlantic Coast beached birds.

If the idea of necro-birding leaves you cold, then how about being a bird detective? *Bird Tracks and Signs: A Guide To North American Species* will quickly make you realize how much more there is to birding than just looking at the bird. Birds are complex creatures with richly varied behaviors, and sometimes those behaviors leave traces behind long after the bird has flown away from our prying bins. There are obvious signs like tracks, pellets, and feathers, as well as the more subtle signs of a bird's life like the particular way woodpeckers open nuts and galls. Many of these clues to a bird's presence are detailed in this fine volume. There was actually a precedent for this book when *Tracks and Signs of the Birds of Britain and Europe* by Brown, Ferguson, Lawrence and Lees was published in 1987 by Christopher Helm. When I bought that book years back, I lamented that we did not have a companion volume for our side of the pond because of how unique and useful a book that European guide was. Finally, here is the book I had hoped for.



While out in the field, I am sure all of you have found some errant feather you could not immediately recognize. So far, I have found the lengthy chapter on feather identification in *Bird Tracks and Signs* to be the most useful section, and now often use the book in the field for this purpose. Color photographs show several typical feathers for each species listed. A sampling of feathers from several different feather types is shown for each species. In my experience, the ones chosen appear to be those feathers that are most commonly found.

There are other lengthy chapters on pellet, track, and dropping (always popular) identification. The color photographs that are used throughout the book are supplemented by good line drawings. Overall, the photos are of a high quality, although a few are just a tad dark or not as contrasty as one would like, but this is a very minor complaint. Measurements are typically given with each photograph, which is important because objects are not reproduced to scale. Naturally, any volume this broad in scope cannot include all the species of North America, but surprisingly many of the common or representative species are included. The focus of *Bird Tracks and Signs* is always on trying to get the reader to first look for signs of birds, to expand the birders' field of focus, and then where possible to identify these signs to species or at least to family of birds. After all, it is one thing to recognize that a fish has been picked over by a gull, and quite another to be able to say with certainty what the gull species was. The writing throughout is chatty, personal, and informative:

> On any number of occasions, just before I begin teaching a class or workshop, I've been approached by a person who tentatively asked 'We're not going to be looking at a lot of turds, are we? We aren't going to pull any apart, right?' And I always smile 'As much as we can find.' Then I attempt to sell them on the educational wonders of scatology (p.187).

There is a meaty chapter on "Signs of Feeding and Other behaviors" (pp. 211-297) that covers a myriad of topics like caches, carcasses left over by predatory birds, and various woodpecker signs. But I did find the chapter on nests to be surprisingly short since it focuses more on general nest types. Birders interested in nest specifics should consult a book like *Birds' Nests* by Hal Harrison. The chapter on skulls is also short but does illustrate some of the basic skull types, although the illustrations are small and not to scale. The skulls are also grouped according to some very general characteristics like "typical bills," "duck bills" (only two examples), "hooked bills," and "unusual bills."

While leading a trip to Quabbin recently, we found a few small feathers amid the hemlocks that we identified, thanks to this book, as those of a Saw-whet Owl. Just knowing that this elusive owl was right where we had hiked added a special "zing" to our experience that day. *Bird Tracks and Signs* opens up a world beyond the simple identification of a species and allows us to peer into the lives of birds. There is also a deeper effect this book has on birders, because it changes the way we see the natural environment, expanding our mind to consider not only the bird but the branch the bird rested on.

Have people always been so obsessive about birds? The next book offers part of an answer. In many ways *Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots* is an archetypal academic press book. In other words, a well-researched volume about a narrow and little-known subject. But Louise Robbins has chosen a fascinating historical corner to noodle around in. Intending to write a biography of the great natural historian, the Comte de Buffon, Robbins became increasingly fascinated by the numerous accounts of the many parrots, monkeys, elephants, and rhinos exhibited or kept as pets in Paris in the eighteenth century. The sheer volume of this exotic pet trade is breathtaking. By way of just a small example: "Between 1687 and 1694 the purveyor brought at least nine hundred animals to Versailles, including more than one hundred ostriches and five hundred purple swamphens" (p.20). The exotic animal trade just kept growing after that point as keeping monkeys and parrots became all the fashionable rage in Paris.

Exotic birds were such a big business that there even existed a bird seller's guild called the oiseleurs. These gentlemen, sometimes prone to street fighting when they did not get their way, controlled all aspects of the capture, import, and selling of birds like canaries, linnets, goldfinches, chaffinches, parrots of every type, and African firefinches, as well as other creatures like small monkeys. The trade was brisk and lucrative. But as in all entrepreneurial endeavors, there was an eventual economic downturn for the oiseleurs, during what Robbins amusingly calls "the canary bubble." This occurred when wily Swiss bird sellers infiltrated the Paris markets and undersold their competitors. The trade in feathered pets was indeed fiercely competitive.

Some of the species of birds the Parisians kept as pets were not only the expected pretty cage birds mentioned above, but also species that would be considered odd even by today's standards. Bizarrely, the South American trumpeter (*Psophia* species, possibly *Psophia crepitans*) was considered by contemporary French intelligentsia among the best, and most moral of animals: "De La Borde had contended that tame trumpeters were as faithful as dogs; they obey and follow their masters and exhibit joy in seeing them, but chase away ugly or bad-smelling people..." (p.155). Of all the birds they could have chosen as a replacement for the guard dog, the choice of this tropical relative of the rails is truly strange.

But *Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots* is not just a dry cataloguing of the popular pet trade. Robbins is really interested in how these animals were considered and discussed by a society very much in violent transition. She details the complex history of the royal menagerie. This zoo was originally an eclectic collection of strange and exotic animals and birds chosen by the king for reasons of personal fashion and whim. The menagerie's architectural design allowed the animals to be viewed by the public, and they were exhibited as symbols of status and power: "They (historians) have shown how rulers metaphorically demonstrated their control of domestic and international affairs through demonstrating their control of exotic plants and animals" (p. 38). Robbins traces the menagerie's ups and downs, the changes in

the types of animals exhibited, and how these poor creatures were procured. As one can imagine, huge numbers of these birds and animals died in transport. The history of this menagerie is also shown in relation to the tumultuous social and historical events that occurred in Paris during and after the revolution. Robbins is particularly interested in what Parisians thought about the animals they kept and exhibited, and the use of these animals in literature, philosophy, and art as symbols of freedom and liberty, and as metaphors for the human condition.

Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots is a unique social history, meticulously researched and well written. It is filled with numerous interesting details and fascinating insights about how a human society imagines, manipulates, and interacts with the natural world.

The Ghost With Trembling Wings is another book that looks at human obsession with natural history. Scott Weidensaul has written one of the most intriguing and far-ranging books about our feelings about extinction and the resurrection of species that are thought to have vanished long ago.

The book begins with Weidensaul's richly detailed account of his search for Semper's Warbler in St. Lucia. This nondescript bird that he refers to as "the dullest tropical bird on Earth" has not been reliably reported since the 1960s, although there has been a handful of unsubstantiated sight records since then. In telling the story of Semper's Warbler, Weidensaul relates other stories of species of birds, animals, and plants that were thought to have become extinct, but then are seemingly miraculously rediscovered. Typically, a passionate search for a long-lost bird or mammal ends in failure, like the recent search for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. But just often enough, as in the case of the Night Parrot of Australia or the Indian Forest Owlet, lucky biologists find evidence that these ghosts still fly among us. These stories of rediscovery hold a special fascination for us, and Weidensaul is interested in why this is so. But finding a lost species is one thing and holding onto it quite another. He details the numerous setbacks and challenges that the rediscovery of the Black-footed Ferret incurred as it became a nightmare of frantic wildlife management and failed captive breeding. Once a "thought-to-be-extinct" species is discovered, only then do the problems really start, because usually that species' habitat is under extreme pressure or almost nonexistent. Often there are too few individuals to maintain a viable, genetically varied population.

It is at this point in the book that Weidensaul broadens his scope of inquiry in some surprising ways. He talks to cryptozoologists, folks searching for the likes of the Loch Ness Monster. There is an amusing interlude when he flies to England to talk with a group of people convinced that a sizable population of large wild cats, like leopards, are now living in Cornwall. Weidensaul lets these eccentric researchers have their say, but not without reasoned criticism. He is more interested in why these

people have such a strong desire to believe that large wild creatures still walk among us. He sees a relationship between the cryptobiologists' strange convictions and our passionate interest in the finding of extinct species of birds. *The Ghost With Trembling Wings* charts some unusual and original territory in this investigation. There are chapters on people trying to "breed back" current species to recover extinct species like the auroch and the Quagga. There are also several schemes, à la Jurassic Park, to recover the DNA from extinct species and bring them back to life. Although I knew of such (still impossible) plans for the woolly mammoth, I was absolutely surprised to learn that folks have similar schemes for the thylacine of Tasmania, the Huia of New Zealand, and even the Moa!

The book ends with a thrilling chapter describing the author's expedition to the jungles of Mato Grosso Brazil in search of the Cone-billed Tanager. The only specimen of this bird was taken by a doctor in the 1930s who sold his skins to a French ornithologist, and that is the extent of what we know of this bird. I will not reveal whether Weidensaul does see his quarry, because the larger question for him is why do we care if this obscure bird still exists? And we *do* care; after all, look at the intense interest in the search for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. It's a complex question with many possible answers. In an interview with Weidensaul, we talked about a need to feel that the world is still as wild and as complex and rich in creatures as it always was. We want to believe that we have not unalterably changed the world. We want unknown wild pockets of nature to still exist, to continue to surprise us. Perhaps these feelings are even ingrained in us from a time when numerous large, now extinct animals roamed all around early humans. I personally believe that these feelings of longing also lie at the very heart of birders who have ever quested after the rare, the extralimital, and the atypical. As Weidensaul describes it at the end of *The Ghost With Trembling Wings*:

> What makes the cone-billed tanager special is its mystery; should it ever reappear, it would become just another rare bird in a world already saddled with too many threatened organisms. It may be that we need icons of faith and aspiration, objects of great quixotic quests, more than we need the reality (p. 310).

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Brown, R., J. Ferguson, M. Lawrence, and D. Lees. 1987. *Tracks and Signs of the Birds of Britain and Europe*. London: Christopher Helm.

Harrison, H. 1975. *Birds' Nests*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

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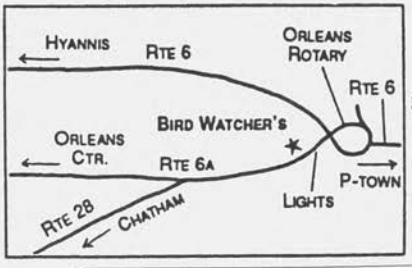

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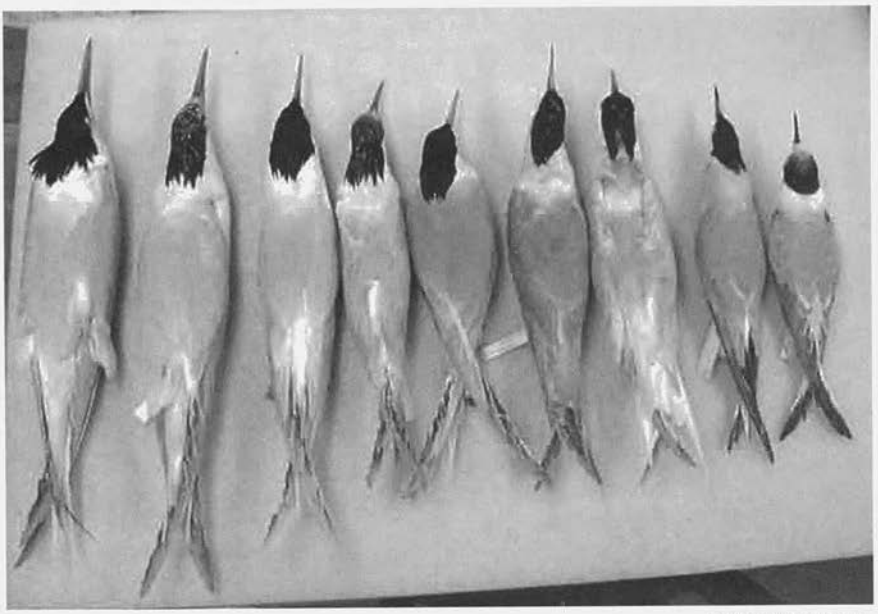
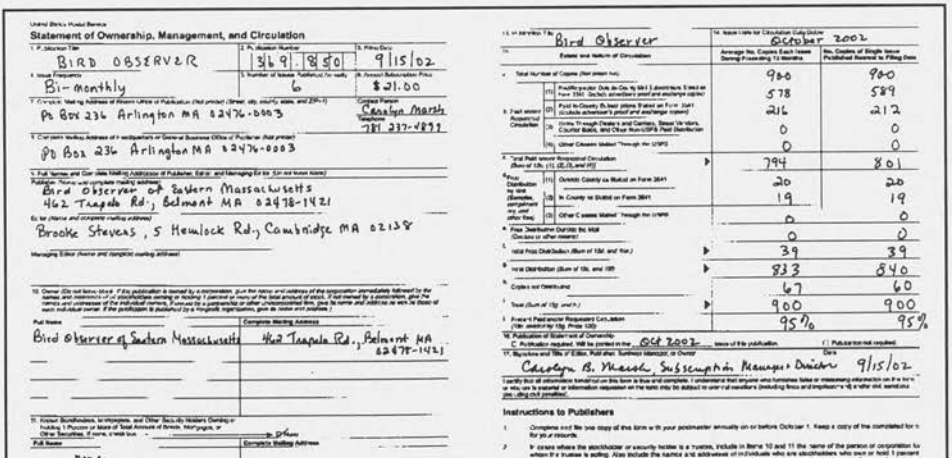


JEREMIAH TRIMBLE

A comparison of the relative size and coloration of five species of terns from the Museum of Comparative Zoology (Harvard University) collection, illustrating relative sizes and mantle coloration. From left to right are two Royal Terns (*Sternamaxima*), two Elegant Terns (*Sterna elegans*), two Lesser Crested Terns (*Sterna bengalensis* - two races), a single Sandwich Tern (*Sterna sandvicencis*), and two Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*). Compare these images with the bird seen on South Beach in August (Hot Birds). This image is copyrighted by the Museum of Comparative Zoology.



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